

# The God Who Sees

Genesis 21:8-21

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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June 25, 2023/Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

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This week, our church received a new children's Storybook bible in the mail. It's called *The Peace Table* and is the collaboration of a team of writers, artists, and theological advisors put together by Herald Press.

I didn't quite know what to expect when we ordered this bible. I'm all for finding creative and compelling ways for kids to access the narrative of Scripture. But I've lived long enough and am *just* cynical enough to think, "Really, *another* bible?"

I think it's fair to say that lack of access to the bible in our culture is not a problem. We are awash in bibles.

I have at least five in my office, probably another ten at home. I have three illustrated children's bibles. I have a bible in Arabic (which I cannot read) and a First Nations rendering of the New Testament. Soon, there will be an Anabaptist bible to add to the mix.

I have bibles from former pastors. I have bibles that belonged to my grandparents. I have bibles in German (which I also cannot read, and which has been a persistent source of disappointment to some of you, I know).

I have *The Message*, a New Testament translation by N.T. Wright. I have a Greek New Testament (which I also cannot read without online translation aids).

And, of course, I have the Internet. Bible Gateway gives me access to approximately sixty different English translations.

In my chaplaincy work at the jail, part of my job each week is to distribute bibles to those who request them.

There are filing cabinets full of bibles. Recovery bibles, Redemption bibles, Help-finder bibles, Catholic bibles, faux-leather King James bibles, plain old paperback NIV bibles, pocket-sized New Testaments that are only to be used for those in solitary confinement, and even comic book bibles (these are enormously popular, and we have to ration them).

I doubt it would be an exaggeration to say that never has the bible been so readily available, and in so many customized formats designed to attract the reader... and never has it been so little read.

(Ironically, I think the bible is read more often in jail than in the church! This is partly because it's pretty boring in jail and there are very few distractions, but I wonder if it's also because they're a bit hungrier?)

At any rate, this is the context into which *The Peace Table* arrived on my desk on Thursday. *Another* bible.

Well, I am pleased to report that *The Peace Table* is actually a very good children's bible. It is beautifully made, and the story is well told.

There are beautiful prayers and exercises and questions to ponder. There are maps and timelines to help kinds orient themselves to what they are reading. And the artwork is quite stunning!

My only quibble would be that I think they don't spend quite enough time on Holy Week and on the crucifixion of Jesus (both in the narrative and in the art).

But overall, I was very impressed. I would enthusiastically put this in the hands of any child (or adult! I spent a good chunk of Thursday afternoon reading it)

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So, I had this beautiful children's bible on the desk beside me as I sat down to write this sermon on Hagar and Ishmael.

The thought occurred to me. It's a bit odd that we try to make our bibles beautiful, marketable, "relevant."

On one level, I get why we do this. We believe that the bible contains the word of life, hope, salvation. It is the story of God's love for us and for the world. We want people to encounter this message.

But the story between the two covers of any bible messy and confusing at times. It can even be ugly. There is likely too much violence and bizarre behaviour for our taste. There are customs that we find bewildering, even offensive.

It has narrative and poetry and legal code and personal correspondence, and witty aphorisms and folk wisdom and wild apocalyptic literature all slammed together between two covers, and it's not always easy to figure out how it's all supposed to fit together.

This almost certainly contributes to why so many read it so little.

Today's text would probably fit into the category of "ugly" and "messy."

What are we to make of an Egyptian slave being used by her master (ostensibly the hero of the story) to have the child his wife couldn't? At the *very* least, the sexual ethics and power dynamics at play here fit awkwardly with modern sensibilities!

What are we to make of the jealousy and nastiness exhibited by Sarah? Or of Abraham "solving" the conflict between Sarah and Hagar by sending a vulnerable woman and her teenage son out into the harsh wilderness on their own? Or of God apparently condoning all this?

What about the other parts of Scripture that talk about caring for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the stranger?

I was pleased to see that *The Peace Table* did not shy away from this story. I think the artwork they chose for this story communicates well the anguish that this story produces in its hearers, perhaps especially for the mothers among us.

The story of Hagar is, among other things, the story of the pain of a mother. This is a theme that echoes throughout Scripture.

**Eve** experiences the pain of one of her sons murdering the other.

**For Sarah** it is the pain of long childlessness (a theme that recurs throughout).

**Rebekah**, like Eve knows the pain of being the mother of sons in conflict.

**Leah and Rachel** feel the pain of trying to secure a future in a patriarchal culture that forces them into difficult situations.

**Jochebed** (the mother of Moses) experiences the pain of giving up her child to be raised by another to preserve his life.

**Naomi** experiences the pain of the death of her sons, with all the disorientation and desperation that follows in a culture where children secured your future.

**Hannah**, again, knows the pain of long childlessness.

**Bathsheba** lives the pain of being used and sexually exploited by a man in power, and the pain of seeing a husband die.

**Elizabeth?** You guessed it, the pain of childlessness.

**Mary**, the mother of our Lord. She experiences the pain of watching your son be misunderstood, mistreated, and ultimately murdered by religion and empire.

American novelist and theologian Marilynne Robinson could well have been speaking for the mothers in her novel *Gilead*, when she said:

It seems almost a cruelty for one generation to beget another when parents can secure so little for their children, so little safety, even in the best circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

And today, of course, we think of Hagar. A bit of back-story is required.

As we saw last week, Abraham and Sarah have received the divine promise that God will bless them with descendants as numerous as the stars.

But they remain childless well into their old age. So, they take matters into their own hands, with Sarah telling Abraham to *use* (I think the word is appropriate) their Egyptian servant Hagar to produce a child.

Almost immediately things begin to go sideways. In Genesis 16 we see that when Hagar conceives, she begins to look on Sarah with contempt (no whitewashed characters! Hagar is not the pure victim here).

Sarah complains to Abraham, Abraham rather callously says, “Do what you want with her, she’s your slave” and Sarah begins to treat her so harshly that she runs away into the wilderness.

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<sup>1</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004), 129.

An angel of the Lord finds her near a spring of water and tells her to return to Sarah and submit to her, but also tells her that her son will also become a great nation.

Hagar returns and we don't hear much until sixteen or so years later, when Sarah conceives in her old age and gives birth to Isaac.

One day Sarah sees Hagar's son Ishmael playing with (or laughing at? the Hebrew is ambiguous) her boy Isaac and again grows resentful of Hagar and her child. It will be Isaac, not Ishmael that is the inheritor of the promise and blessing of God!

So, she sends Hagar and Ishmael away, out into the wilderness again.

They wander. They run out of water. We can imagine that it is a hot and unforgiving landscape. They are in a desperate place.

Hagar resigns herself to their fate. She cannot protect her son. Their exile will end in death.

She puts Ishmael under a bush and leaves him there. She cannot bear to be present when the wilderness claims her precious son's life.

But then something happens.

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him (Gen 21:17-18).

Hagar sees a well of water and God spares their lives. And God keeps his promise. Ishmael would indeed be the father of a great nation. Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions consider him to be the ancestor of the Arabs and the patriarch of Islam.

In Genesis 16, when Hagar ran away and was encountered by an angel by the river, it was the God who sees who came to her aid. This is the name Hagar gives to the place where she heard the voice of God: *El Roi*, "the God who sees me."

In Genesis 21, it is the God who hears. And he hears the voice "of the boy," which is interesting because the story does not record Ishmael saying anything at all. The text only mentions the weeping of Hagar.

But the angel says, “Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.”

(Speaking of themes recurring throughout Scripture, angels telling people not to be afraid would be another!)

In both stories, God sees and hears the cry of the powerless. In both stories, God rescues and sends the story off in a different direction.

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Earlier I quoted Marilynne Robinson’s beautiful novel *Gilead*. Its central character is a preacher named John Ames. In one part of the novel, Ames reflects on preaching a sermon on the text that we’ve been reflecting on today.

Here’s what Rev. Ames says at one point:

The story of Hagar and Ishmael came to mind while I was praying this morning, and I found a great assurance in it. The story says that it is not only the father of a child who cares for its life, who protects its mother, and it says that even if the mother can’t find a way to provide for it, or herself, provision will be made. At that level it is a story full of comfort.

That is how life goes—we send our children into the wilderness. Some of them on the day they are born, it seems, for all the help we can give them. Some of them seem to be a kind of wilderness unto themselves. But there must be angels there, too, and springs of water. **Even that wilderness, the very habitation of jackals, is the Lord’s.** I need to bear this in mind.<sup>2</sup>

Even the wilderness is the Lord’s. This is yet one more theme that runs throughout Scripture.

The wilderness can stand for a place of testing, a place of refinement, rebellion, suffering, fidelity, and more.

It speaks of a barren place, a dry and desolate place, a place of struggle and hardship.

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<sup>2</sup> Robinson, ??

A place where God seems absent.

We may have never been sent away into a literal wilderness, but I suspect that there are few people who have not had these “wilderness” type experiences.

But the wilderness is also a place where God can be discovered anew.

Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama’s *Three Mile an Hour God*. Koyama says this about “the wilderness”:

Wilderness... is the place where we are face to face with danger and promise. And that is an educational situation for the people of God. When danger and promise come together for us, it is called crisis. The Bible does not simply speak of danger. If it did so, the biblical faith would be reduced to a “protection-from-danger-religion.” The Bible does not simply speak about promise. If it did so, the biblical faith would be reduced to a “happy-ending-religion.” The Bible speaks about a crisis situation, coexistence of *danger* and *promise*—wilderness—and there God teaches [us]. In the wilderness we are called to go beyond “protection-from-danger-religion” and “happy-ending-religion.” There we are called to “trust” in God.

The wilderness is the place where a deep trust can emerge. Trust that goes beyond happy endings, beyond pleasant circumstances, beyond protection, beyond what we can *get* from God. Trust that clings to God for his own sake.

The wilderness is where God alone must be enough.

And Hagar discovers this to be the case. Both times she is in the wilderness, she encounters the God who sees. The God who hears the cry of the vulnerable, the powerless, the sent away.

There are all kinds of things about the ugly, messy stories of the Bible that might make us squirm.

But the God who sees? The God who hears? The God who rescues those in need? This God we are drawn to. This God we love.

And this God we *recognize*. Because ultimately, we see this God in Jesus.

Jesus knows what it is to be sent away.

Jesus knows what it is to be sneered at, misunderstood, mistreated. He knows what it's like to be on the run. He knows what it feels like to be sacrificed on the altar of other people's ideas of purity.

He knows the wilderness.

He has gone there to do battle with the devil. He has gone into the wilderness of abandonment on the cross and emerged out the other side victorious.

This is why Jesus has always been good news for those who are sent away, those who are out of options, at the end of themselves, those who have nowhere else to turn.

And he still sees. And he still hears.

And so, I want you to know that whatever you might be facing this morning...

Whatever crises might be looming.

Whatever doubts and anxieties might be gnawing away at your soul.

Whatever fears might be clouding your vision.

Whatever guilt or shame might be rattling destructively around in your brain.

Whatever pains of the past might be stubbornly hanging around to define your present.

I want you to know that God sees. And God hears. And that the God who rescued Hagar and Ishmael will rescue you, too.

It might be a while in coming. It might not look exactly like we imagine.

There is both danger and promise in the story of Scripture and this is the same in our lives.

But ultimately, it is always God, not the wilderness, who has the last word. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

